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Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 3 November 1999 at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Morales (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Spain)

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In the absence of Mr. Zackheos (Cyprus), Mr. Morales (Spain), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Agenda item 38: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East *(continued)* (A/54/13 and Add.1, A/54/338, A/54/345, A/54/376, A/54/377, A/54/385 and A/54/477; A/C.4/54/L.13-19)

1. **Mr. Osei** (Ghana) said that his delegation supported the statement made by Jordan on the previous day on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and also strongly endorsed the initiatives taken by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to ensure the welfare of the Palestinians.

2. Ghana associated itself with the conclusions of the working group on the financing of UNRWA, on which it had served, and expressed concern that UNRWA continued to be faced with financial shortfalls. The 1998 budget deficit of $61.9 million was quite disconcerting, since UNRWA would have to carry forward the austerity measures which had been in place since 1997, adversely affecting the level and quality of services provided by the Agency.

3. His delegation reiterated that until a final settlement of the Middle East problem was achieved, the international community had an obligation to support the work of UNRWA; it joined previous speakers in appealing for increased resources to the Agency. At the same time, the need for greater budgetary transparency and efficiency in the management of the Agency's funds had to be stressed. In that connection, his delegation welcomed the recommendations made by the Office of Internal Oversight Services, in document A/54/267, and was pleased to note that the management of UNRWA had already accepted those recommendations and was in the process of implementing them. It was only in that manner that donor support and confidence could be maintained and sustained.

4. **Mr. Al-Alawi** (Oman) expressed appreciation to the Commissioner-General for his exhaustive report (A/54/13) and his statement in the Committee and said that his delegation was concerned about the adverse situation of the Palestinian refugees in the occupied Arab territories. The work carried out by UNRWA was an integral part of activities to fulfil the obligations of the international community to the inhabitants of the occupied Arab territories, who had been forced to leave their homes as a result of Israeli occupation. By its actions against Palestinian refugees and displaced persons, Israel was defying the international community and violating the provisions of international covenants and agreements and General Assembly resolutions, particularly with regard to the obligation of the occupying Power to ensure the security of the civilian population during times of war.

5. The positive changes in the situation of Arab-Israeli relations and the resumption of the peace process gave cause for optimism. Oman hoped that it would be possible to unite the efforts of all parties in the interests of reviving hope and confidence and restoring security and stability in that important region of the world.

6. Oman continued to support all efforts aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the Middle East problems, in particular the Palestinian problem, and believed that the peace process was an important element of those efforts. Nevertheless, the problem of refugees remained, and Oman called upon all the parties to sit down at the negotiating table, in a constructive atmosphere, so as to find acceptable solutions which would guarantee the legitimate rights and dignity of the Palestinian inhabitants, particularly their right of return, taking into account the interests of neighbouring countries.

7. UNRWA must cooperate closely with the Palestinian Authority — the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The transfer of the Agency's headquarters to Gaza was a logical and rational decision, and Oman called upon the international community to provide further financial and political support to UNRWA and the Palestinian people, particularly at the current decisive stage of the Middle East peace process. Oman also called upon the Israeli authorities to cooperate with the Agency.

8. **Ms. Wang Wenzhao** (China) thanked the Commissioner-General of UNRWA for his detailed report on the work of the Agency and paid tribute to the Agency staff for their untiring efforts to help the Palestinian refugees, which contributed to the promotion of stability in the region.

9. Concerted efforts by the international community and the relevant parties had recently led to some

progress in the Middle East peace process. Israel and Palestine had reached an understanding on the implementation of the Wye River agreement and negotiations on the final status of Palestine, and had signed the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement. That positive momentum must be maintained. China hoped that the peace process would move forward in accordance with the principle of "land for peace".

10. The refugee problem had always been at the core of the Middle East peace process. At the current crucial time, the Palestinian people needed, more than ever, the sincere and strong support of the international community. Over the past half century, UNRWA had surmounted various difficulties and contributed greatly to mitigating the sufferings of the refugees and advancing the Middle East peace process. Its efforts had become an indispensable part of the whole peace process. Since the role of UNRWA had special significance, the Agency's financial crisis could not fail to arouse grave concern. The financing shortage not only undermined the work of UNRWA, but also had an ominous impact on the fragile peace process. China hoped that the international community would make concerted efforts to help UNRWA overcome its financial difficulties, thereby providing meaningful support to the peace process. It also hoped that under the new circumstances, UNRWA would tap its potential and constantly improve its management mechanism.

11. Her Government had always given staunch support to the Middle East peace process and supported the work of UNRWA; in 1999, it would continue to make contributions to UNRWA.

12. **Mr. Kamal Yan** (Malaysia), expressing appreciation for the work of UNRWA as the main institution providing the most varied services to the 3.6 million registered Palestinian refugees, said that Malaysia commended the Agency's efforts to improve the level and quality of services despite declining resources. In connection with the measures taken by UNRWA to return to a more stable financial position, his delegation was heartened that the recently concluded informal meeting of major donors and the host Government in Jordan had generated additional contributions of about $7 million to UNRWA.

13. Malaysia strongly believed that a solution to the refugee problem was a prerequisite to the attainment of just and lasting peace in the Middle East. It continued to be concerned that, for over five decades, the Palestinians had been unable to return to their homes, and therefore supported further expansion of the Peace Implementation Programme, which had brought about improved living conditions for the Palestinian refugees, increased employment opportunities and the development of infrastructure. In conclusion, he said that over and above its bilateral assistance to the Palestinian people, Malaysia intended to make a contribution of $20,000 to the work of UNRWA.

14. **Mr. Pohan** (Indonesia) said that his delegation wished to reiterate its support for the mandate entrusted to UNRWA, which had contributed in large measure to the social and economic development of the occupied territories. The Agency's endeavours had alleviated social and economic pressures, thereby contributing to stability in the region. In that connection, his delegation welcomed the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh memorandum by the Palestinian and Israeli leaders on 4 September 1999, which, it was to be hoped, would lead to the resolution of other contentious issues within the framework of the final status negotiations, including the question of refugees, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions and based on the principle of "land for peace".

15. The Peace Implementation Programme had been beneficial in channelling funds to crucial services, thereby improving the quality of life of the Palestinian refugees, creating job opportunities and contributing to the development of the infrastructure. His delegation also acknowledged with appreciation the efforts which UNRWA was making in such varied fields as the development of human resources, shelter rehabilitation, poverty alleviation and social development programmes for young people, women and persons with disabilities.

16. In view of the fact that peace and development were interrelated, it was crucial that the United Nations and its agencies, in particular UNRWA, should continue to play a pivotal role in enhancing overall development, which would help to build a foundation for stable peace in the Middle East region.

17. **Mr. Dausa Cespedes** (Cuba) said that, as could be seen from the report submitted by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the Agency had discharged with honour its task of alleviating the lot of more than 3.5 million Palestinian refugees, but in doing so it had run into problems such as a lack of resources.

That had only led to a deterioration in the living conditions of the refugees. His delegation supported the appeal of UNRWA that the amount of contributions and the volume of resources should remain at the former level and increase, so that it could resolve serious problems which the Agency encountered in such fields as the provision of emergency assistance and health and education services and assistance in ensuring employment. His delegation wished to express its concern about the obstacles encountered by the Agency in the normal performance of its functions as a result of the restrictions placed by the Israeli authorities on the movement of people and goods between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It was also regrettable that the Agency had not been able to complete the preparation of the feasibility study for the establishment of the University of Jerusalem "Al-Quds" for Palestine refugees.

18. In that connection, his delegation believed that those who expressed their support for the peace process and advocated a peaceful and lasting settlement of the conflict in the Middle East, and who also had the financial resources, should respond to the appeal made to them to contribute to the work of international agencies such as UNRWA. Despite the economic problems it had to face, Cuba would continue to make every effort to provide Palestinian young people with an opportunity to study in Cuba and obtain qualifications in order to serve their heroic people.

19. **Mr. Haque** (Bangladesh) said that his delegation was concerned about the continuing funding shortfalls in the regular budget of UNRWA. The international community must understand that any shortfall in the regular budget had an adverse effect on the well-being of the Palestine refugees. His delegation urged the international community, in particular the donors, to provide funds to help the Agency so that it could raise the quality of health and education services to the desired level. It also appealed to the international community to be more responsive to the needs of the Agency and its clients and to meet their obligations with regard to the timely payment of their pledged contributions.

20. The Peace Implementation Programme of UNRWA deserved encouragement as it helped to improve the quality of life of the Palestine refugees.

21. The assistance activities of UNRWA enhanced the social and economic situation of the refugees and contributed to stability in the region. Despite the financial crisis, the Agency was continuing its efforts to ensure community participation in various activities such as rehabilitation, health care, education, institution building and youth activities. Those activities boosted the morale, confidence and skills of the Palestine refugees. His delegation greatly appreciated the role played by UNRWA in the economic empowerment of the Palestine refugees through the establishment of a network of microenterprise credit programme.

22. It was a matter of some concern that, on the pretext of imposing security procedures, continuous impediments were created causing dislocation in the operations of the Agency. His delegation called upon all those concerned to honour their commitments and to respect the mandated work done by the Agency in the interests of the Palestinian population. The so-called security needs should in no way jeopardize the well-being of the refugees.

23. **Mr. Robinson** (Canada) said that for 50 years Canada had supported UNRWA. There was now justifiable cause for optimism that the refugee issue was nearing resolution, but that in no way diminished the important role played by UNRWA. It was essential that UNRWA should have the means to provide humanitarian assistance until such time as a resolution to the refugee issue was negotiated and implemented. In that connection, his delegation was concerned about the ongoing financial challenges confronting UNRWA. During the past year, UNRWA had once again experienced a budgetary shortfall. Current cash flow needs were being met by borrowing from the budgets of future projects; that was leading to significant indebtedness.

24. The funds provided by donors to UNRWA translated into education, health and social services to the refugees. Although donor contributions had been growing, they had failed to keep pace with the rate of growth in the refugee population. That had required UNRWA management to impose reductions in services to the refugees. The per capita spending of UNRWA had declined by some two thirds since 1980.

25. The consequences of continued reductions in UNRWA services, particularly at the current critical juncture in the peace process, were of deep concern to Canada. As a result, Canada's contribution to UNRWA had increased by 50 per cent in the past two years,

bringing its total contribution to UNRWA since the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 to US$ 100 million. In the current year, in addition to its contribution of Can$ 10 million, the Canadian Government had decided to provide a further Can$ 5 million to the UNRWA core budget.

26. UNRWA had an obligation to ensure that the money provided by donors was managed in an efficient and responsible manner. That was the key to maintaining donor confidence in UNRWA.

27. Canada supported, and would be an active player in, the partnership between UNRWA, host Governments and donors.

28. Despite the difficulties experienced in recent years in the peace process, the working group on refugees had continued its efforts to bring tangible improvements to the humanitarian conditions of the refugees. To date, the working group had helped to raise over US$ 100 million in additional assistance for Palestine refugees in Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan and the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

29. It was important that the refugees should have the opportunity to voice their concerns directly to the international community. In order to achieve that, Canada had led seven missions to refugee camps, the most recent being a mission in June 1999 to Jordan. The mission, comprising representatives of Canada, Egypt, the European Commission, Japan, Sweden and the United States, had heard the concerns expressed by the refugees regarding the level of physical and social infrastructure services provided to the most needy segments of the refugee population.

30. The working group could play a constructive role in helping the parties to achieve a solution to the refugee issue. Canada would maintain a close dialogue with the regional parties to ensure that the working group made a positive contribution to the peace process.

31. **Mr. Bozay** (Turkey) said that Turkey attached great importance to a just and durable peace in the Middle East. In that conviction, Turkey had given full support to the peace process from the very beginning. UNRWA was one of the main factors which complemented the peace process by providing much-needed stability for the sake of peace.

32. Now, the Agency faced serious problems resulting from the growing gap between its financial resources and its needs. That situation endangered the maintenance of UNRWA services at acceptable levels, in terms of quantity and quality. Unlike other United Nations organizations, which worked through local authorities or executing agencies, UNRWA provided its services in the fields of education, health relief and social services directly to Palestine refugees.

33. An atmosphere conducive to peace could be created and sustained only by healthy, socio-economically developed and well-educated generations.

34. Enhanced support for UNRWA by Member States continued to be essential now more than ever. Turkey, as a member of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and as a Chairman of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA, would continue its activities in that respect.

35. **Mr. Mekdad** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that over half a century had passed since the start of the tragedy of the Palestinian people, and yet the sufferings of 4 million Palestine refugees continued as before. It was obvious that Israel, by encouraging Jews from all over the world to emigrate to Arab territories, was pursuing its policy of violating the rights of the Palestinian people, who had been forced to flee their lands. Failure to heed the danger inherent in the problem of the Palestine refugees would impede the efforts being made to find a comprehensive and just means of solving the Middle East crisis.

36. Referring to the report of UNRWA, he paid a tribute to the Commissioner-General and his staff for their efforts to improve the situation of the Palestine refugees. He expressed his delegation's appreciation for the precise and detailed information provided, especially concerning those difficulties and problems encountered by UNRWA which threatened its activities. It was deeply disturbing to learn that the per capita expenditure for one refugee had been reduced from US$ 200 in 1995 to US$ 70 in 1997, at a time when the number of refugees had risen by 30 per cent.

37. The Syrian Arab Republic was making enormous efforts to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestine refugees and bore a significant burden of expenditure, the amount of which greatly exceeded the sums received from the donors. The Syrian Arab Republic dealt with the Palestine refugees as if they were its own citizens, with the exception of the question of citizenship itself, which was governed by Act No. 260 of 1956.

38. Assistance to the Palestine refugees was an obligation of the entire international community. UNRWA should continue its work, and not a single area of its activities should be curtailed or transferred to the authority of any other organ until such time as the question of the Palestine refugees was ultimately solved, in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948. The Syrian Arab Republic appealed to the donor countries to expand their financial assistance in the light of the mounting number of refugees, and to contribute to all UNRWA programmes, and not only to some of them. It also appealed to the Agency to continue providing assistance to the Palestine refugees in all spheres of its activities without any discrimination.

39. A clear distinction should be drawn between donations to the Palestinian administration, on the one hand, and donations for UNRWA activities, on the other, because there was no link between them.

40. It was essential to increase the UNRWA budget in the Syrian Arab Republic, so as to enable it to provide unfettered aid to Palestine refugees. It was hard to believe that less than 8 per cent of the UNRWA budget went to his country, at a time when the registered refugees in Syrian territory alone numbered over 347,000.

41. His country looked forward to the day when the international community would comply with United Nations resolutions and the provisions of international legal instruments, so as to enable the Palestinian people to return to their lands, from which they had been forced to flee. That was the only way to solve the problem of the Palestine refugees. Accordingly, the Syrian Arab Republic considered that the policy being pursued by the Government of Israel to create settlements constituted an infringement of the rights of the Palestinian people and testified to Israeli efforts to maintain tension in the region, without speaking of the serious violation of United Nations resolutions and the norms of international humanitarian law. The Syrian Arab Republic appealed to the international community to reject the policy of Israel, which was attempting to solve the problem of the Palestine refugees by ignoring their rights. Israel was thereby circumventing the peace process and undermining efforts for a just solution of the Middle East crisis on the basis of the implementation of the relevant decisions of the international community.

42. **Mr. Al-Otaibi** (Kuwait) said that the assistance provided by UNRWA in the areas of health, education and relief and social services in the five regions where it was active were vitally important and should continue to be provided on the same scale, so that the Agency could fulfil its mandate on the basis of the resolutions of the United Nations.

43. The Arab position on the question was that: firstly, the international community bore responsibility for the fate of the Palestinian refugees and UNRWA must continue its work until the refugee issue was settled in accordance with paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III); secondly, UNRWA should not alter the volume of services provided to the Palestinian refugees in the five areas of operation; and, thirdly, the Agency should avoid discrimination in its work and should not place the burden of expenses on the shoulders of the refugees because of its own financial difficulties.

44. Kuwait had for a long time been providing assistance to the Palestinian refugees, had participated in the implementation of a number of infrastructure projects and had made annual financial contributions, because it was convinced of the rightness of the Palestinian cause, which had not progressed because of the delaying tactics of Israel and its non-compliance with the resolutions of the United Nations. The sufferings of the Palestinians had been exacerbated by the policy pursued by Israel in the occupied territories on the pretext that it was in the interests of national security and of the effort to combat terrorism. However, those interests could not be used to justify Israel's continuation of such actions as the closure of territories, the destruction of homes, the confiscation of land and the establishment of settlements, which were contrary to the norms of international legality and to the provisions of the fourth Geneva Convention and were also at variance with the positive climate in which the peace process was taking place.

45. Kuwait fully supported the efforts of the Palestinians to regain their lawful rights and the Arab position that a comprehensive and just peace must be based on the resolutions of the Security Council and the principle of land for peace. In that connection, it hoped that the Israeli Government would honour all the agreements concluded with the Palestinian administration, so that the Palestinian people could exercise its political rights, including the right to self-

determination and to the creation of an independent State with its capital in Jerusalem.

46. Kuwait would continue to assist in those efforts and hoped that in future UNRWA would be able to perform its task without hindrance.

47. **Mr. Droushiotis** (Cyprus) expressed deep appreciation to UNRWA, which through its programmes of education, health and relief and social services was helping to improve the living conditions of 3.6 million Palestinian refugees and to strengthen stability in the region. As a country sharing close ties with its Middle East neighbours, Cyprus attached great importance to the enhancement of the economic and social conditions of the Palestinian people and to the achievement of lasting peace and security in the Middle East. To that end, the work of UNRWA was crucially important.

48. Cyprus knew from experience the significance of assistance to alleviate human misery and of the inalienable right of return to one's home and property, as proclaimed in the resolutions of the United Nations.

49. He placed high value on UNRWA's activities and praised the Agency's staff, who performed their tasks with commitment and dedication. He noted with concern the difficulties that the Agency was encountering in carrying out its programmes because of its critical financial situation. In his report, the Secretary-General had noted that the Agency's continuing financial deficit was having a negative effect on the level and standard of services. In the light of those circumstances, UNRWA's operations must be placed on a secure financial footing, and Cyprus joined in the appeals for additional and increased contributions to UNRWA, so that the Agency could perform its work.

50. One of the fundamental prerequisites for durable peace and stability in the region was the attainment of higher standards of living for all peoples there. Cyprus had joined in international efforts aimed at the economic advancement of the Palestinians and had not only made cash contributions to UNRWA but had developed its own scheme of assistance to the Palestinians, which included the construction of two medical centres in the West Bank and professional training for Palestinian officials in Cyprus.

51. Cyprus welcomed the renewal of the peace process, as evidenced by the agreement signed in Egypt, and reiterated its firm commitment to a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East based on United Nations resolutions.

52. The upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of UNRWA was an event which would underline the need for compliance with United Nations resolutions and international law, in the interests of a final settlement of international problems and improvement of the refugees' plight. Cyprus once again stressed the indispensable role of the Agency and praised its important work in rendering assistance to the Palestinian refugees.

53. **Mr. Martino** (Observer for the Holy See) said that the Holy See noted with appreciation the valuable services rendered by UNRWA to the Palestinian people in need for almost half a century.

54. The new peace process was worthy of commendation, but the ongoing expansion of settlements and confiscation of land could pose a real threat to a stable and definitive solution to the crisis in the land which was the Holy Land, especially to believers of the three monotheistic religions.

55. The Holy See felt morally bound to assist those in need. The Pontifical Mission for Palestine, in collaboration with other agencies of the Catholic Church, was seeking to provide the aid necessary to sustain a level of decent human living for those displaced by settlement expansion and land confiscation.

56. The humanitarian aid provided to the refugees by UNRWA and the church agencies would continue. However, it should not be understood as a substitute for a just, stable and definitive solution to the problems of the region.

57. It was to be hoped that the solution to the problems would include the question of the Holy City of Jerusalem. In that regard, the following conditions must be met: the global character of Jerusalem as a heritage common to the three monotheistic religions must be guaranteed; religious freedom in all its aspects must be defended; the acquired rights of the various communities with regard to shrines, centres of spirituality and study and charitable institutes must be safeguarded; the maintenance and development of the respective religious, education and social activities must be guaranteed; and the three religions must be treated equally.

58. Over the past five decades, the Holy Land and its inhabitants had experienced too much suffering. The urge for peace had therefore become imperative.

59. The Holy See hoped that the untiring efforts of UNRWA and the Pontifical Mission for Palestine over the past 50 years would soon be crowned by the full implementation of the Wye River memorandum and the conclusion of the final status negotiations.

60. **The Chairman** drew the attention of Committee members to draft resolutions A/C.4/54/L.8-12 on agenda item 89 and to draft resolutions A/C.4/54/L.13-19 on agenda item 88, and said that a decision on them would be taken at the following meeting.

The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.